

STATE OF NEW MEXICO  
**County of Luna**

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### **Media Release**

Damage to a Luna County Detention Center telephone for the purpose of procuring weapons led to a short period of lockdown for Luna County inmates on Wednesday, May 6.

Contrary to an incorrect media report based on the allegations of a sole inmate, Luna County Detention Center officers followed standard operating procedures to secure a cell block after finding several three-to-four inch screws to be missing from a telephone.

The incident began shortly after noon when county employees were investigating damage inmates caused to a shower and exhaust fan and came across a telephone that had been dismantled with screws removed. Inmates were left in their cell block, unrestrained, for questioning until about 3:20 p.m., when they were moved to a recreation yard.

Detention Center director Matthew Elwell said none of the inmates would provide information on why the phone was damaged or where the screws were hidden. About \$1,000 in damages were incurred by the phone, shower and exhaust fan.

Due to a lack of cooperation by the inmates, all of whom are from Luna County, officers removed them from the cell block and placed them in a recreation yard to search their cells. The inmates were not restrained until moved from the cell block to the yard, which is standard procedure to protect inmates and officers.

While the inmates were in the yard, Elwell said, some began with unruly behavior and attempts to alter the restraints by moving handcuffed hands from behind their backs to front of their bodies by moving handcuffs under their feet. Inmates then began kicking on multiple doors and continuing with pre-riotous behavior. About \$2,000 in damages were inflicted on the yard doors by inmates.

“The inmates were restrained and taken to the yard to allow staff to safely search the cell block for the missing screws,” Elwell said. “We’re missing screws, so we didn’t know if they had fashioned them into shanks. We shackled them for their own safety and for the safety of the officers.”

Shortly after 4:20 p.m., the inmates were commanded to stop their riotous behavior, step away from the door and disperse. The inmates then began threatening officers with taunts. At about 4:25 p.m., after additional commands to disperse and stop damaging the door, one quick shot of OC — or pepper — spray was sprayed through the door, yet inmates continued to refuse orders.

“Anytime you deploy spray, you expose inmates and staff,” he said. “Every staff member in the area felt the same effects.”

At about 4:27 p.m., a small smoke and pepper spray unit was deployed into the yard. Just minutes later, after inmates finally complied, detention officers began decontaminating and washing the inmates. During inspection of the cell, all of the missing screws were found.

“At no point did inmates suffer from physical injuries, and inmates were certainly not restrained for hours in their own bodily fluid. That is a ridiculous allegation,” he explained. “One inmate was taken to the hospital as a precautionary measure for his breathing, but was given a clean bill of health by a medical doctor at the hospital.”

The entire incident, from moving inmates into the yard to cleaning them and returning them to their cells, took place from about 3:20 p.m. to 5:40 p.m.

“If they had not been disruptive and damaging property, the search for the screws would have taken an hour at most,” he added. “Due to their unruly, pre-riotous behavior and threats to officers and property, officers followed standard operating procedures to subdue the threat in the interests of inmate and officer safety. Even when restrained, unruly inmates can be extremely dangerous and do terrible damage.”

Charles “Tink” Jackson, Luna County manager, commended the officers involved for their work to deescalate the situation without injuries to inmates or fellow officers. He also expressed disappointment in the rush by media to publicize the event without facts.

“It is sad to see a journalist use the lone word of an inmate to build a story that reflects negatively on our hard working detention officers,” he said. “Rushing to publish unsubstantiated allegations by an inmate, instead of waiting for more facts, is a poor reflection on the standards of journalism.”

He said Elwell had received grievances for the incident and that all were cleared through an investigation utilizing video surveillance from the detention center. `

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